

The Fight, Flight and Plight of the Plover

In Duxbury April marks the start of plover season when a small population of delicate, white-bellied shorebirds touch down on our beach. Their mission: to procreate four chicks per pair, refuel and set off again in August for warmer destinations.

Atlantic coast plovers are a federally threatened bird population. There are only about 1,300 pairs of this population from Newfoundland to North Carolina, said Scott Hecker, director of Mass. Audubon Society's coastal water bird program, as he walked the beach one May afternoon in search of plover nests called "scrapes."

The sand-colored adult piping plover, *Charadrius melodus*, is a tiny plump bird weighing 1.5 to two ounces; it is about seven inches in length. It is found only in North America and the total plover population numbers about 2500 pairs.

The demise of the plover dates to the late 1880s when wealthy Americans began developing coastal areas; that and bird hunting for the millinery trade nearly wiped out the entire species, prompting passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Soon after, the plo-

ver population began to recover with record numbers being recorded until 1940.

After World War II, however, increased coastal development caused their survival rates to plummet again, this time into the 1980s. Unlike some species, "piping plovers do not adapt to coastal development," said Hecker.

Protection came in 1986 when they were designated as a federally threatened species, and listed among 13 North American endangered birds under the state's Endangered Species Act.

Their habitat is also protected under the Massachusetts Wetland Protection Act, which is a strong regulatory tool used by the state to protect the plovers from degradation caused by dune activities and off road vehicles, explains Scott Melvin, senior zoologist for the Mass. Division of Fisheries and Wildlife.

Since 1987, programs, like the Mass. Audubon's Coastal Water Bird program, have helped increase the plover population in Massachusetts from 126 pairs in 1987 to as many as 505 pairs in the last year. Melvin attributes Massachusetts' success to the state's "tremendous plover habitat and



Two plover chicks hunker down in an abandoned seashell. Duxbury's plover rescue program produced 13 fledged chicks this summer.

Photo by Scott Hecker

many well managed beaches."

On Duxbury Beach, the plover's population increases are traced to the efforts of the Duxbury Beach Reservation, the Audubon Society, the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, and to the town's beach managers. Endangered Species Officer Mike Lane, along with Don Beers and his team, prepare the beach each year well before the plovers' arrival.

To protect the plover, Lane and his monitors delineate habitat, control access and essentially baby-sit the chicks after they're hatched. (Piping plovers typically lay four eggs per nest, and they do not "sit" on

the nest until all four eggs are laid in the scrape.)

This year's preparations also included the whole controversy over dogs - the proposed ban, the leashing, the permits.

"Personally, I think the dog leashing and permits worked well this year," said Lane. "We never had real issues with things, and I only had to write out three tickets myself, mostly to non-residents who didn't know the rules."

Hecker said predator exclosures have helped. "We increased hatchling success, but the piping plover babies immediately ran out into the beach and found all kinds of other problems." Among those problems are off-road vehicles.

"Duxbury Beach Reservation, or any town or anybody, who allowed vehicles on the beach had to pay attention," said Hecker. This prompted vehicle restrictions, such as roping off areas near the dunes to give the chicks more space.

Today, it's still a balancing act to maintain safe habitat for endangered species while allowing maximum access to off road vehicles. "There is a small segment of the population who have a strong interest in being able to drive on the beaches, plus off road permits provide income to some municipalities," adds Melvin. (This year

alone, Duxbury sold over 6,000 off road permits.)

The senior zoologist believes, however, that "we are moving toward a complete closure of these beach areas during the plover breeding season." Such closures would occur from May through July, and then a "significant portion" of the beaches would re-open.

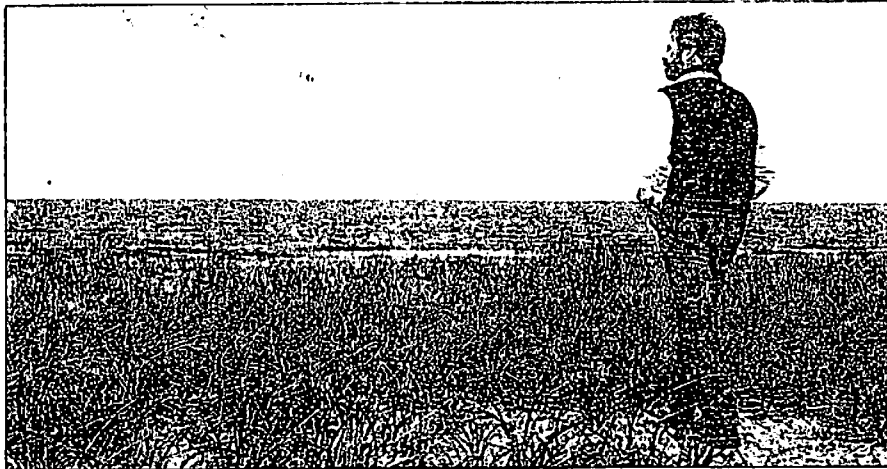
But whether or not there are

2002 Plover Stats

Total Plover Pairs: 14
Total Plover Nests: 12
Total Eggs: 47
Nests Lost from Storm: 4
Nests Lost from Dogs: 0
Chicks Lost from Storm: 4
Nests Vandalized: 1
Fledged chicks: 13
Duxbury's State Ranking:
 Just under 1 chick fledged

beach closings in the future, there is room for optimism over the future of the plover.

Next year could be a banner year for chicks on Duxbury Beach. The use of predator exclosures, improved artificial nesting areas, and continued restrictions on vehicles, dogs, and human activity are evidence that the plovers' plight can be reversed. As Melvin points out, "beaches have good years and bad years. There's just no way to deal with Mother Nature."



From a grassed over sand dune Scott Hecker surveys the quietude of Duxbury Beach. He directs the Mass. Audubon Society's coastal water bird program.

Photo by David Grossman

Bay in the Balance



CREDITS

The Bay in the Balance series is edited by David Cutler. Special thanks to David Grossman for providing much of the photography for this series. For more of his work visit www.gurnetroad.com